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Enlightenment

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The following excerpt is adapted from *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders*, by Don Herzog, to be published in August by Princeton University Press. Publication here is by permission.

— BY DON HERZOG

ENLIGHTENMENT



It's a curious broadside, a work of austere graphics and polite prose far removed from the mischievous engravings and bawdy ballads usually appearing on such sheets. Drawn from an address that 345 printers had signed and 138 had presented to the queen, the original text was committed to parchment "and accompanied by a Copy superbly printed on white Satin, edged with white Silk Fringe, backed with Purple Satin, and mounted in an Ivory Roller with appropriate Devices." Even in the published version, the arch is full of intricately detailed work. The printers took pride in their craftsmanship: "This Specimen of the Typographic Art," they bragged, "was surrounded by the Border and Ornaments on this Sheet, which alone contain upwards of Twenty-six Thousand moveable Pieces of Metal." The quantitatively inclined will want to know that it measures 215/8 by 151/4 inches.

On the top, an arch marked Lords on one end, Commons on the other, supports a crown. So much is unremarkable, a casual reference to very old theories of mixed government: English politics was a balance of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. But on the bottom, an equally impressive display of filigree work surrounds, of all things, a printing press.

The published version reproduces the printers' address to the queen, presented on 14 October 1820, and adds her response. (Well, not precisely her response. The queen's English wasn't very good; she couldn't have turned out the impeccably clipped cadences of the published response, and through the tawdry events of 1820 her advisers produced one text after another published in her name.) The printers congratulate the queen on her safe arrival in England and accession to the throne. They describe themselves as "the humble instruments of that mighty power," the press, "which, in advocating your Majesty's cause, so energetically sustains the declining liberties of England"; they advert ominously to a conspiracy against her; they close with a bravado flourish:

In future times, should the page of History record the present era as one in which overwhelming Power combined with Senatorial Venality to crush an unprotected Female, we trust it will also preserve the gratifying remembrance, that the base Conspiracy was defeated by the irresistible force of Public Opinion, directed and displayed through the powerful medium of a *Free, Uncorrupted, and Incorruptible British Press*.

Posterity, even history's page, has no particularly sharp memory of the matter, gratifying or otherwise. As far as it has survived, though, it usually hasn't been framed quite this way.

Whatever her own beliefs about posterity, the queen exhibits a doughty courage in responding. She too embraces public opinion: "It is Public Opinion which has supported me in the otherwise unequal conflict with numerous adversaries, who not only possess unbounded resources, but who have never scrupled any means by which their vengeance could be gratified. This Public Opinion is the concentrated force of many enlightened minds, operating through the medium of *The Press*." Not all the press, concedes the queen, serve as the medium of enlightenment. Thanks to the vicious tactics of her nameless adversaries, their tireless efforts to intimidate and corrupt the press, some are "busily employed in fabricating the most atrocious slanders against myself. . . ." But the queen is sanguine, pleasantly surprised that in the face of such tactics, so much of the press has remained honest, smugly confident that "The force of truth is ultimately irresistible:—but truth, without some adventitious aid, moves with a slow pace, and sometimes its motion is so slow as to be imperceptible — *The Press* is its accelerating power — *The Press* gives it wings — *The Press* does more for truth in

a day, than mere oral teaching could in a century."

But why the lionization of the press? Who was the queen? Who her nefarious enemies? I don't mean to be coy. The queen was Caroline. Her husband was George IV, finally about to take the throne in 1820 after a painfully long tenure in that trying role of Prince of Wales. As prince, George had a nasty habit of running up fabulous gambling debts and turning to Parliament to pay them off. Hundreds of thousands of pounds later, George faced an arranged marriage with Caroline of Brunswick in an attempt to make him properly settled. George already was secretly married to a Catholic widow, Mrs. Maria Fitzherbert. Or sort of secretly: rumors had swirled through London. But Charles James Fox, the great Whig leader, assured Parliament that there was nothing to the rumors; and George married Caroline in April 1795.

They didn't live happily ever after; apparently, one night together was enough to disgust the groom. Unluckily enough, though, George managed to get Caroline pregnant. "I shudder at the very thoughts of sitting at the same table with her," George confided in one friend about a year later, "or even of being under the same roof with her." Watching her dance, one observer was appalled: "Such an over-dressed, bare-bosomed, painted eye-browed figure one never saw!" Though the prince's father, George III, was her staunch ally, Caroline

departed in 1814 for a career of continental travel — and, or so it seemed to many, of carousing and sexual escapades. She befriended and rapidly promoted one Bartolomeo Bergami to ever more prestigious and intimate positions in her household. Their relationship scandalized observers.

George III died on 29 January 1820; Caroline landed in England on 5 June, with every intention of asserting her place as crowned queen. Eyebrows were raised, curiosity provoked, appetites for gossip inflamed: indefatigable diarist Charles Greville moaned on 25 June that the affair was "an intolerable nuisance," monopolizing conversation in polite society. What was George to do?

Years before Bergami's appearance on the scene, George already was charging Caroline with sexual infidelities, trying in vain to rid himself of her. A "delicate investigation" in 1806, pursued behind the scenes and kept fairly quiet, cleared her. Quiet, but not quiet enough: Caroline and her advisers got as far as printing, but not publishing, *The Book*, a collection of confidential negotiations and accusations. Writers learning about the proceedings approached George for hush money. 1813 saw a flurry of activity — shades of the seven-year itch — and the appearance of *The Book* for public delectation. Now George was ready to move more decisively. A green bag, the

ordinary parliamentary device for conveying documents but soon to become infamous in radical circles as a dread symbol of secrecy and corruption, revealed to Parliament the case against Caroline. Soon the House of Lords considered a special Bill of Pains and Penalties designed to abrogate the marriage. So ensued what amounted to a trial, beginning 17 August, with lawyers for both sides introducing evidence and interviewing witnesses. Monarchy was on display in all its tattered and seedy glory. Legal proceedings on adultery ("crim. con.," short for criminal conversation, in the thinly veiled parlance of the day) had long made for popular reading; so too had stories about sexual antics at court. The intersection of these two genres was sizzling, even explosive. Perhaps the dignity of the House of Lords was threatened by the endless days of testimony on the particular positions of hands, postures in carriages, bodies gliding silently through dark chambers, stains on bed sheets, and the like testimony that came for the most part from an apparently disreputable band of foreign servants. But the nation found the spectacle enticing, even riveting. These were issues of momentous constitutional import. They were inescapably also issues of titillating folly. The gossip, already bubbling up before Caroline's return to England, comes fast and furious in contemporary sources.



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Caroline dressed like a man! Bergami was a woman! Caroline was actually crazy!

George, who didn't appear himself, had a hard time posing as the innocent and injured husband, and not only because he was a bigamist. Portly, even bloated, providing an easy target for hostile cartoonists and pamphleteers, "the dandy of sixty" remained inordinately fond of pretty women and had one intimate affair after another. This notorious fact gave Whig lawyer Henry Brougham, the queen's chief advocate during the proceedings, an opportunity that he exploited to excruciating effect. Calmly instructing the Lords that he was happy to draw a veil over what had transpired between Caroline's initial arrival in 1795 and her departure for the continent in 1814, Brougham declared airily that the queen's cause "does not require recrimination at present," but he added that later he might need to explore those years. A legal advocate, he continued, must be relentless in pursuing his client's interest: "He must go on reckless of the consequences, if his fate it should unhappily be, to involve his country in confusion for his client's protection!" Insinuated, retracted, and finally pressed forcibly home, the threat was palpable. Should the king approach victory, his own inglorious sexual history would be explored.

George was laboring under burdens besides those of dalliance and girth. Memories of his spendthrift days stood in poignant contrast to the burdens of taxation and poverty created by war with France. (I wonder how many knew of his fetching proposal that an £8 million budget surplus be transferred "to my

private coffer, in consideration of my exertions & all I have done for the country as well as for the whole world. Such are my deserts, at least such I feel them to be.") Some, too, thought George's apparent eagerness to assume the regency in the days of his father's madness unseemly. So George's enemies found Caroline a convenient weapon; much of the apparently warm affection for her is nothing but poorly disguised hostility to him. "Poor woman," wrote Jane Austen, "I shall support her as long as I can, because she is a Woman, & because I hate her Husband. . . ." Protagonists be damned, thought some radicals, relishing the stakes in public discussion of these matters. Leigh Hunt told the poet Shelley that the proceedings would help topple belief in monarchy and provide discussion of "questions of justice respecting the intercourse of the sexes."

Others were irritated or appalled by the transparency of the sexual double standard. David Ricardo complained, "The question of her innocence or guilt is not the important one, — she has been abominably treated, and no grounds have been, or can be stated, to prove this disgusting enquiry either just, or necessary for the public good." Similarly, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a decidedly dyspeptic Tory by then, conceded years later, "The People were too manly to consider the Queen was guilty. 'What right had the King to complain!' was their just argument." Caroline starred as darling of the radical press, some of the mainstream press too, in maudlin celebrations: "History has no example," gushed one writer, "of a spirit so noble in unmerited suffering, a fortitude so meek and so immovable." Whatever the impact of public opinion, the proceedings didn't go well for George. Witnesses faltered: "Non mi ricordo," one Italian witness's

favorite dodge, became proverbial in English as a way of avoiding saying something embarrassing. On 10 November 1820, a scant majority of nine votes on the bill's third reading forced the government to withdraw the bill.

A joke limped its way among the nobility: "If anybody asks you why the Queen is like the Bill of Pains and Penalties, you must say because they are both abandoned." In the streets, the crowds were jubilant. In time-honored fashion, all over England, they demanded illumination: home owners could display candles in their windows at night, joining the celebration, or risk having their windows broken. Robert Southey, poet laureate and sidekick of Wordsworth and Coleridge, sullenly refused to join one such celebration and was grudgingly relieved to find his windows intact. "Lord, what a stupid monster John Bull is," scoffed Walter Scott.

A dour George withdrew from the public eye for a couple of months, stewing over what to do with a detested wife neither convicted nor cleared by the parliamentary proceedings. Others had to face the question: Was she going to be crowned queen? Fumbling over what title to assign Caroline, the *Anti-Jacobin Review* retailed some of the salacious details:

But not contented with traveling in Europe, the princess hired a vessel to take her to Asia; and among her suite was Bergami. On board the *Polacco* many acts of gross indecency are sworn to have taken place. Bergami accompanied her when she was bathing; he was seen kissing her on a gun; a tent was erected on the deck of this vessel, which was on various



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occasions closed during the day . . . the Queen and Bergami remaining under it; and finally under this tent Bergami and the Princess slept for thirty-five nights!

Such are a few, and only a few, of the *Facts* of this case; do they not speak for themselves? Is such a woman fit to be Queen of England?

Guided by the broadside, one presumes that the *Review* was part of the dishonest press, intimidated and bribed by George and his underlings. So too, perhaps, was *John Bull*, a caustic Sunday newspaper launched precisely to combat public affection for Caroline: "I have not the slightest respect for your Majesty," sneered the paper in one of its many blistering editorials. Readers were aghast: "There is the most infamous newspaper just set up that was ever seen in the world — by name *John Bull*," wrote one observer the day after this editorial. "Its personal scurrility exceeds by miles anything ever written before." But the paper had one notable fan. A year or so later, George would expatiate on *John Bull*'s literary and political virtues — it had done more for the country, he insisted, than he and his ministers and Parliament and the courts — and would add that he had been obliged to recall a judge, in part for finding the editors guilty of libel.

Caroline did her best to join George at his coronation on 19 July 1821. But the guards had been ordered to refuse her entry. Besides, she hadn't a ticket. Riding around Westminster Abbey, Caroline tried persistently to get in, but in vain. Suddenly, public opinion turned against her. She died less than a month later. (One must relish the delicious accidents of timing: word of Napoleon's death

wound its way to England about the same time. Someone hustled to bring George the news: "Sir, your bitterest enemy is dead. 'Is she, by God!' said the tender husband.") This disorderly woman wasn't the enemy of social order as such; she was the champion or figurehead of a new order against an old one.

Unattractive as George was, duplicitous as his efforts against her, it's hard to believe in Caroline's pristine purity. The exigencies of political debate might seem to require that we pretend that our side, whatever it is, has no vices, the other side no virtues. If historical distance is good for anything, though, it's good for overcoming such Manichaean fantasies. So the handbill's easy dichotomies — the incorruptible press against base conspiracy, the honest press against the hireling press — are glib, moralized, unhelpful. The printers offer them to flatter Caroline and demonize George, but they're as plausibly available to her opponents. *Blackwood's*, in fact, charged that "the radical newspapers were bribed into daring activity." Caroline is at best an ironic badge of enlightenment, the press's frenetic attention to the debacle at best an uneasy sign of the march of truth.

Afflicted by a bit of a misanthropic streak, I relish the irony, but I also want it for theoretical purposes. Everyone knows the tiresome off-the-shelf tropes of enlightenment: the age of reason, the assault on priestcraft and statecraft, *écrasez l'infâme*, and all the rest. No doubt they could be rehabilitated. Still, they're lifeless. Enlightenment-bashing may not be all the rage, but it's a perfectly well-respected academic activity. The enlightenment has come to stand for a commitment to "reason," whatever that is, or to "foundationalism" or "universalism" or "human nature" or some such naive category that we

(enlightened ones?) have outgrown in the name of some comfortable if vague communitarian relativism and some fashionable if equally vague set of views about social construction. All too soon we are back in the land of ghostly and puerile abstractions, moths drawn to noxious theoretical flame. I'm never sure what the political stakes of such debates are.

I am, though, confident that launching an investigation by pondering this tacky affair doesn't load the dice in favor of — or against — a scarecrow named enlightenment. And I'm pretty sure I know what's at stake in the printers' missive to Caroline. Or at least I know how to start thinking about a text that in the midst of a vulgar scandal makes a printing press an almost sacred icon and bumbles on about the redemptive power of public opinion.

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